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SUBJECT: Minsk Election Weekly II (December 24-30)

11. This is the second in a weekly series of election-oriented reports, providing brief items of interest related to the March 19, 2006 presidential elections.

The Candidates

All Eight Potential Candidates Registered, Now it Gets Hard

12. The Central Election Commission (CEC) registered support groups for all eight would-be candidates. This is the first step toward becoming a candidate. The nominees are (and size of support group is):

Aleksandr Lukashenko (6,212 people)
Aleksandr Milinkevich (5,135)
Valery Frolov (1,152)
Sergey Gaidukevich (3,073)
Aleksandr Kozulin (3,347)
Zenon Poznyak (2,405)
Sergey Skrebets (143)
Aleksandr Voitovich (1,305)

The next, and final, step to becoming a candidate is the collection of 100,000 signatures of support. Only registered members of the support groups can collect signatures, and it is illegal to distribute campaign literature during collection. Deputy Head of the CEC Nikolay Lozovik told the press, "It is not easy to collect 100,000 signatures. I believe there will be much fewer contenders after this stage of the election campaign is over."

"Pointless for Poznyak to Run"

13. CEC head Yermoshina told the press she sees no reason for Zenon Poznyak to run for president. Even though the CEC registered his support group, Yermoshina said she does not think he can legally run because he has lived abroad for the past nine years. She explained, "In 2001 the decision to let him run was taken for political reasons... to show him the real level of his public support. If he failed to understand it back then, there is no point in giving him the opportunity to participate in elections again."

Skrebets to Stand Trial on January 16

14. Presidential contender and former MP Sergey Skrebets' trial will

start January 16 in the Supreme Court. Skrebets was arrested on May 15 on suspicion of giving a court official a USD 30,000 bribe. He has been in pre-trial detention since his arrest. CEC deputy Lozovik told the press Skrebets can run in the elections as he has not yet been convicted. However, if he won the election and was subsequently convicted, the elections would have to be annulled.

Poznyak's Campaign Head Arrested, Home Searched

15. On December 27, Minsk police arrested Sergey Popkov, head of Zenon Poznyak's support group and campaign, on suspicion of attempting to pass a counterfeit US 100 dollar bill. Police searched his apartment, but found nothing illegal. Christian Conservative Party (Poznyak's party) deputy Yury Belenky claimed police were more interested in looking at party information, computer files and other political documents, than in searching for more counterfeit money.

Milinkevich Warned Over Early Campaigning

16. On December 27, CEC official Nadezhda Kiseleva warned Milinkevich and his campaign team against campaigning ahead of the authorized period. Kiseleva said she had heard Milinkevich's team was already distributing literature in several cities. Under the Election Code, candidates can only campaign after they are officially registered, and can only use funds provided by the CEC for campaigning expenses. The CEC plans to register candidates between February 12 and 21, and give each candidate BYR 66,700,000 (USD 31,000) to campaign. CEC deputy Lozovik the same day announced, "At the moment, there is no way we could press any sanctions on Milinkevich for starting his pre-election campaign... If his support team gets caught doing that, they will be held responsible to the CEC in conformity with the law... If instances of premature campaigning are revealed during signature collection the signatures collected in violation of election requirements will be considered null and void."

Observation

Who Will Observe?

17. CEC head Lidiya Yermoshina announced the GOB would begin inviting foreign observers in January. She said some well known political figures, NGO leaders, human rights activists and election experts would be invited, but did not provide any details. CEC deputy Lozovik told PolChief on December 23 that the best election observers are from the CIS, "Because they understand the peculiarities of Belarus' circumstance and the unique advancement of Belarusian democracy." Lozovik did agree that CIS observers always positively assess elections in which all other observers find serious problems. Lozovik confirmed election observation NGO Partnership would not be allowed to observe the elections as it is not registered. He said there are plenty of registered NGOs that could observe, but when pressed could only name one, the Belarus Helsinki Committee (which is fighting for its life in the courts).

And ODIHR?

18. On December 23, Pol Chief discussed the possibility of an ODIHR mission with the OSCE mission deputy and with CEC deputy Lozovik. OSCE said ODIHR hopes to send a two or three-person needs assessment team to Minsk in early January. ODIHR does not need an invitation to observe to send this team, but does need tacit understanding with the CEC and MFA in order to get visas. OSCE added that the GOB told them they had not yet decided on inviting ODIHR, making it unlikely any ODIHR mission could arrive in time to observe the signature collection phase. Lozovik told Pol Chief he recommended the GOB not/not invite ODIHR, as the OSCE lacks objectivity. However, Lozovik thought the GOB would issue an invitation regardless.

Partnership Cannot Observe

¶9. Nikolay Astreika, head of the Partnership NGO, announced on December 30 that Partnership as a group would be unable to conduct large-scale election observation, as they had in 2004. Astreika said the elections had been called too soon, meaning the NGO could not conduct long-term monitoring, and they had already failed to observe the formation of territorial election commissions. Moreover, many activists had moved on to other civil society activities, such as helping reduce unemployment and improve the country's infrastructure. Astreika did not exclude the possibility that some Partnership members would be interested in trying to observe the elections, possibly through registered groups. [Comment: In the 2004 elections, the two main independent observation groups were Partnership and Vyasna, neither of which is registered.] Perhaps not coincidentally, Astreika was released from jail on December 29, after spending 12 days in lock-up for organizing an unsanctioned meeting of his NGO.

Not a Level Playing Field

Pro-State Trade Union Supports Lukashenko

¶10. A spokeswoman for the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB), the GOB-controlled union structure that claims to represent over 95% of workers, over four million people, announced all of its branches would unanimously support Lukashenko. [Note: In 2001, Lukashenko's main challenger headed the FTUB. After Lukashenko won that election, he removed his competitor and placed one of his supporters in charge of the organization.] At a December 23 conference, FTUB's leadership further pledged to campaign for Lukashenko, and to inform workers about Lukashenko's platform and views. Despite this activity, FTUB Chairman Leonid Kozik told reporters, the FTUB "has never engaged in politics." Lukashenko Pandering for Support?

¶11. In the past week Lukashenko ordered that pensions would be raised by nine percent on January 1, decreed that doctors' salaries would increase 230% to 350%, retroactive from December 1, and vowed to support the Catholic Church in Belarus. While all of these are continuations of trends begun at least a year ago, it is likely they are also intended to raise Lukashenko's support before elections.

Minsk City Ideological Department Purged

¶12. On December 20, the entire staff of the ideological department of the Minsk City government resigned for unknown reasons. They were immediately replaced. The new head of the department, Gennady Kurbeko, previously worked as a television commentator and in the Presidential Administration. One independent source believes this appointment was made in preparation for the March presidential elections.

Almost No Opposition in Territorial Election Commissions

¶13. On December 28, Minsk City formed 10 election commissions, each with 13 people. Of these 130 people, 10% are from political parties, 30.8% from NGOs, 19.2% from worker's collectives, and 15.4% from local government agencies. However, the vast majority of these people are from pro-Lukashenko groups. The NGOs listed are the Belarusian Republican Youth Movement ("Lukamol"), the Belarusian Women's Union and the FTUB. The parties are the pro-Lukashenko Liberal Democratic Party, pro-regime Communist Party, the Agrarian Party, the Social and Sports Party, and the Party of Labor and Justice [note: these last two have no existence outside of election cycles, when they reappear to support the regime]. Some members of the Belarusian Popular Front are the only opposition members known to have made it onto a commission in Minsk.

Same Story in Mogilev

¶14. This above story was repeated in the Mogilev regional election commission, which includes people from the Liberal Democratic Party, the pro-regime Communist Party, and the Lukamol.

Miscellaneous

Boycott Support Drops

¶15. Backing away from his earlier calls for a boycott, Vladimir Kolos urged other intellectuals to support Milinkevich. While not happy with Milinkevich's efforts to win popular support, Kolos said Milinkevich remains the strongest opposition contender.

Twenty Percent to Vote Early/Watch for Fraud!!

¶16. In an interview, CEC head Yermoshina estimated 20% of voters would cast their ballot in the five days of early elections. She explained the CEC offers early voting for the convenience of voters. Yermoshina also warned people not to sign any candidate lists before December 29 ("If they come knocking at your door earlier than that, give them the boot, the crooks!"), and to make sure they know who's candidate list they are signing, as "You may get deceived. They may say they are collecting signatures in support of Lukashenko, while their real candidate is someone else." [Comment: As head of the CEC, Yermoshina is supposed to be neutral. However, she is strongly partisan and in 2004 praised Lukashenko for his "elegant victory" after every one of his candidates was elected to parliament.]

Election in the Russian Press

¶17. According to Belarusian media, several Russian papers have carried coverage of the election. Nezavisimaya Gazeta wrote that Lukashenko's challengers were too slow to act, so most Belarusians know nothing about most of them. The paper did note that, "The only politician who can be an alternative to Lukashenko and about who voters have heard something is Milinkevich." Vremya Novosti claimed Lukashenko is campaigning on his efforts to improve living standards, while Milinkevich is focusing on moral values. Novie Novosti estimated that most of the opposition candidates would not collect sufficient signatures, citing the 2001 election when 25 contenders announced their candidacies, but only three managed to get on the ballot. On-line paper Gazeta SNG.ru claimed Lukashenko is a charismatic leader who had already outmaneuvered his opponents by calling early elections.

Quotes of the Week

¶18. From Lukashenko's December 26 interview with Rossiiskaya Gazeta:

On election timing: "I would have favored a July election. The spring sowing would be over, we would have celebrated Victory Day and Independence Day, and nothing would have been left of the opposition."

"The opposition is telling us they are not ready [for March elections]. What have they been doing for five years? They are simply not ready to be in charge."

"Elections give our opposition a chance to make money."

"Until recently, our opposition has been calling France an example of a democratic state, referring to Belarus as a dictatorial regime. But we have never introduced a state of

emergency, which France has done recently."

PHLIPOT